



## Railways of the future

**D**iscussion continues over the Sunda Strait crossing. Meanwhile the ferry arrangements for transporting the ever-increasing trade across one of Indonesia's most important business links are creaking, dead slow and

occasionally stop. The logistical cost to the nation would be frightening to calculate.

Similar discussions and concerns raged for many decades over the crossing between England and France, back to the 19th century, before it was decided that a rail tunnel option made

the most sense, and so the Channel Tunnel came to be, and much has been written about all the aspects of that project.

The bridge alternative for the Channel crossing was assessed as costlier, more time-consuming and at greater risk from earthquakes, storms



# Infrastructure

and shipping.

While bridges, when completed, look quite spectacular and awe-inspiring, one has to ask, what is the main purpose of the crossing. To facilitate trade and business between Indonesia's major islands and the development of Sumatra? Have the drivers of the project fully consulted with the experts that designed and built the Channel Tunnel?

Talking about trains, I used the train in the UK last month to travel comfortably between Edinburgh and London and back, a journey time of four hours and 20 minutes, and a distance reasonably comparable with that between Jakarta and Surabaya.

While this was a fast train, it certainly was not high-speed rail. Had I used air travel, assuming that all connections to and from airports went smoothly to allow me to go from center to center, the journey would have probably saved me 45 minutes but with the hassle of taking on the various connecting linkages at each end.

With respect to the Jakarta-Surabaya corridor, it has been said that this is the last remaining high population density location in the world without a decent rail link.

Plenty of sound advice and material has been written about pushing ahead with improvements to and expansion of the Indonesian rail network, but the slow pace of output remains mired in out-of-date bureaucratic thinking and procedures, coupled with a general lack of the proper skills to run an up-to-date and efficient network.

The network in a modern sense is also hampered by past dependence on the narrow one-meter gauge and poor use of aid funds over the years, for example in terms of rolling stock and signalling. Upgrading the gauge to standard is fundamental to rail taking a significant part in moving freight in Java, which will be required.

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### **Good rail link essential**

As the economy expands, the current dependence on the main road network, even with completion of all the Trans-Java toll road, will require rail to play a component part in moving goods across the island.

Few would argue that a good rail network in Java and judicial links on other islands, primarily with a commodity focus, are essential elements of Indonesia's future land transport requirements.

Where possible a move to standard gauge has to be made and, whatever option for crossing the Sunda Strait is finally decided, the basis for design would have to be with this in mind along with upgrading the proposed Trans-Java and Trans-Sumatra links. At current rate of progress one is looking at a 15-20 year plan.

A decision to reconnect Banda Aceh to Medan by the rail link shut down in 1971 was made after the tsunami disaster of 2004 and, based on a French-financed study, work commenced a few years ago, using standard gauge. So far this has only resulted in a build-out of a few kilometers from Lhoksuemawe towards Banda Aceh and travel with one rail car.

The Japanese plan to build a high-speed connection to Bandung

is interesting. It will involve some challenging engineering solutions through the mountainous section. So far the topography has put paid to any idea of the double-tracking of the old, albeit spectacular, mountainous section of line, in order to accelerate the speed of the journey through the Bandung half of the journey. While the viaducts here are part of engineering heritage, travel by rail a century ago was a much more relaxed event.

The commodity rail plans for Kalimantan are slowly grinding through the route of public-private partnerships, but the fair and acceptable apportionment of risk between local government and private interests to secure funding and title to rights-of-way remain ongoing tasks. There is a need for these rail connections to port outlets, but the question remains when this will be effected. This will feature in the MP3EI corridor plan for Kalimantan.

Monorail is now being actively pushed as part of the solution to city congestion in several locations, and rightly so where land availability is a premium. This and acceleration of the slow-moving effort to build the MRT must be seen as part of alleviation of the unseemly traffic jams which have become the lot of Jakarta residents. Will there be positive changes in city decision-making in the months ahead?

Rail in all its manifestations is a key to the necessary improvement to the land transport requirements to support Indonesia's development. It needs considerable assistance from the private sector to achieve the many goals that are already on the table. None of this will be possible without an overhaul of bureaucratic procedures and quick government decisions.

**Scott Younger** is the president commissioner of Glendale Partners and Nusantara Infrastructure.